Chapter 13
Promoting Political Literacy Among Youth in the Sultanate of Oman:
Challenges, Developments, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

In Oman, as in other countries around the world, young people traditionally have low levels of interest in politics. However, young people have high levels of social media usage, and there is evidence from the literature that new forms of political engagement are emerging through the use of sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. To help ensure that social media can be used effectively to engage citizens in government decision-making process, there is a need to provide young people and other citizens with digital literacy skills. This is especially important in Oman and other Middle Eastern Arab states, where there are currently high levels of youth unemployment, to avoid the type of unrest which occurred in the form of the Arab Spring and instead promote more constructive forms of citizen engagement. The chapter reports on a review of literature which examines these issues in the context of Oman, identifies examples of best practice digital literacy initiatives from other countries, and develops a series of recommendations for Oman.

INTRODUCTION

Like other Arab countries in the Middle East, the Sultanate of Oman is facing a growing need to improve political literacy among youth, and to promote the engagement of young citizens in government and politics. This is critical for the success of democratic politics in Oman, which are based on the Islamic principle of *shura* or "consultation" and embodied in the Shura Council, the lower house of Oman's parliament whose members are elected by and represent the citizens of the Sultanate (Al-Farsi, 2013). In 2017, it was reported that there were around 1.2 million people aged between 18 and 29 within Oman's population, of which 46.7% were Omani nationals (National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), cited in MuscatDaily.com, November 27, 2018). It is therefore crucial that this large segment of the population has the knowledge and skills required to participate responsibly in the political process. However, like other young people around the world, the younger generation in Oman reportedly has little interest in or knowledge about formal politics (Al-Farsi, 2013). A recent survey conducted by Sultan Qaboos University and Oman's Ministry of Information found that of five issues listed as being of potential concern to young people, political involvement was ranked lowest by the respondents (cited in Al-Lawati, 2018).

To become active citizens who participate in the process of governing their country, young people need to acquire the "political literacy" that involves at least a basic understanding of the role of government and the policy making process, as well as awareness of their rights and duties as citizens, and familiarity with current political issues (Papes & Stoycheva, 2013). Governments and politicians have a responsibility to ensure that young people are provided with the knowledge and skills needed to develop this political literacy, but in order to engage their attention it is essential to use their preferred channels of communication and interaction, which now consist predominantly of social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These sites are more often associated with more confrontational forms of political activity, such as the 2010-11 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and the public demonstrations which subsequently took place in Oman, rather than the constructive, participatory approaches to citizen engagement that are an important aspect of democratic government. But social media is the new reality of communications for young people, and offers considerable potential for use by governments in promoting political literacy and participation among young people.

A review of relevant recent literature was carried out in order to identify the main issues and challenges facing Oman in relation to political literacy among young people, and the potential use of social media in this area. The review was also used to identify examples of initiatives and recommendations from other countries for use in developing recommendations for the use of social media to promote political literacy among youth in Oman.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL LITERACY – THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Growing Use of Social Media

Around the world, voting data and research surveys indicate that young people have low rates of interest and participation in formal politics. For example, a 2018 survey of citizens across 14 countries found that young people were less likely than older people to vote in elections (Wike & Castillo, 2019). The Deloitte Global Millenial Survey 2019 similarly found that Millennials, born between 1983 and 1994,

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